

AWARDS 2007 PHOTOGRAPHY

EXPERT'S REPORT

The race for more megapixels continues unabated, with recent launches of 12-megapixel cameras by all the leading manufacturers. However, this year we have also seen a spate of other technologies coming to the fore. Face detection seems to be the must-have feature of 2007, but while it's certainly fun and sometimes useful, we're more excited about bigger zooms, optical image stabilisation and lowering noise levels – all familiar technologies, but ones that are increasingly common in compact digital cameras.

However, our Best Photo Product of 2007 is a standard point-and-shoot camera. The reason it wins our highest accolade is because it delivers fantastic photos at a price that sets a new standard for value.

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FUJIFILM FinePix F20



Too many photography magazines and websites assume that everyone is a photography enthusiast. Here at *Computer Shopper*, we know that you don't have to be a budding David Bailey to want a camera. That's why we take particular relish in hunting down the entry-level cameras with quality that belies their low prices. This has never been truer than of Fujifilm's FinePix F20. It's the most affordable camera we've seen that doesn't compromise on image quality, performance, ease of use or style.

The compact aluminium body and li-ion battery are rare luxuries at this price. The 2.1in screen is slightly less unusual, but its 150,000-pixel resolution shows more detail than the 110,000-pixel screens on other budget cameras. The controls are designed for point-and-shoot use rather than for photography enthusiasts, with some well-conceived and easily accessible scene presets. Our favourite one, Flash and Natural Light, takes two pictures in quick succession – one with the flash and another without, using a high ISO speed. This removes the conundrum of whether to use the flash in low light, as you can simply choose your favourite photo when you get them back to your PC. Those who prefer more conventional photographic controls will find light metering, focus and white balance options, plus ISO settings that go up to 1600.

Performance is one area where the F20 is more run of the mill. The use of slow xD cards limits normal shooting to a photo every two seconds and 0.65 frames per second in continuous mode, but these results are average rather than disappointing.

Meanwhile, the fast, reliable autofocus and a quick startup time ensure that casual users won't feel hindered by the camera's speed.

Image quality is the most important aspect of any camera. Using the same sensor and image processing as Fujifilm's pricier F30, the F20's 6-megapixel photos are packed with detail, even compared to many eight-megapixel cameras. Colours are vivid and flattering but remain natural looking, with incredibly life-like flesh tones and textures. Best of all, photos taken in low light using high ISO speeds display considerably less noise than we're used to seeing at this price. This makes it possible to shoot without the flash at times when other cameras give up. The Auto ISO mode tends to jump to high values, where noise creeps in. However, selecting the Auto (400) option limits ISO speed from 100 to 400, which gives great results in a wide range of lighting conditions.

The F20 has been around for a little while, but its steadily falling price means it's still the camera other budget models must beat – and the one that discerning but frugal shoppers should buy.

DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom (36-108mm, 35mm equivalent), xD slot (10MB internal), li-ion battery **PART CODE** N077830A **LATEST PRICE** £100 inc VAT from www.rankhour.com **DETAILS** www.fujifilm.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Sep 2007



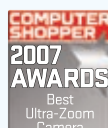
CANON EOS 400D

Canon's EOS 400D is excellent value. Fantastic image quality goes without saying, with sumptuous colours and incredibly low noise, even at ISO 1600. The 18-55mm kit lens is basic in terms of zoom range but provides sharp focus to match the superb detail of the 10-megapixel sensor.

The nine-point autofocus provides fast, accurate focus, even in low light, and the 2.9fps continuous mode will ensure that you never miss a shot. It even managed to shoot at 1.3fps with the flash, which is the fastest we've ever seen. Excellent ergonomics, quick access to key settings, a dust-removal system and a competitive price means that it's hard to fault this camera.



DIGITAL SLR CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 3x optical zoom (28.8-88mm, 35mm-equivalent), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery **PART CODE** 1237B009AA **LATEST PRICE** £444 inc VAT from www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.canon.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ50

We first reviewed the DMC-FZ50 in January 2007, but a drop in price and a notable lack of any worthy competition means it's still the best ultra-zoom on the market.

The FZ50's 12x zoom lens is one of its greatest assets, not just for the creative possibilities that it provides, but also because the lens rings for focus and zoom give far more tactile and precise control than buttons. Performance is just as impressive, capturing a shot every 1.4 seconds during normal shooting and at 2fps in continuous mode. Image quality is fantastic, and although it can't match digital SLRs for image noise, in most other respects its 10-megapixel photos are almost in the same league as Canon's 400D's.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 12x optical zoom (35-420mm, 35mm equivalent), SD slot (32MB card supplied), li-ion battery **PART CODE** PANLUMFZ50 **LATEST PRICE** £275 inc VAT from www.camerabox.co.uk **DETAILS** www.panasonic.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007



OLYMPUS µ780

We have often admired Olympus's range of ultra-compact, splash-proof cameras, but the µ780 is the first one to really impress us. We love its 5x zoom lens with optical image stabilisation. However, the feature that really clinched it is the Shadow Adjustment Technology, which dramatically improves the quality of shots taken in tricky, high-contrast lighting conditions.

Performance is up to scratch, capturing a picture within 1.7 seconds of switching on and another every two seconds. Its 7-megapixel sensor is below average for cameras at this price, but the µ780's shots are sharp enough for printing up to 10x8in prints. This camera strikes an excellent balance between features, quality and price.



DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 5x optical zoom (36-180mm, 35mm equivalent), xD slot (15MB internal), li-ion battery **PART CODE** N2923692 **LATEST PRICE** £170 inc VAT from www.rankhour.com **DETAILS** www.olympus.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Oct 2007

FUJIFILM FinePix S5700

★★★★★

£120 inc VAT



Fujifilm's S5600 impressed us enough to give it a Budget Buy award when we reviewed it in February 2006. Its successor is only subtly different. Once again, there's a 10x zoom lens, a top ISO speed of 1600 and manual control over exposure and focus. There are the usual increases to resolution (from 5 to 7 megapixels) and screen size (from 1.8in to 2½in). However, the really remarkable difference is the price. The S5600 was a bargain at £230, but the S5700 costs just over half that.

It's small and light for an SLR-styled camera and. Although the four AA batteries add to the weight, they also explain the fantastic battery life. Considering its petite design, it's extremely comfortable to hold, with an unusually long rubberised handgrip.

This is the second Fujifilm camera we've seen with both xD and SD card slots. The former is useful only if you already own xD cards, as SD media is cheaper and

faster. However, neither gave great performance, with SD capturing a shot every 2.3 seconds. This is adequate, but below average by today's standards. Continuous shooting was particularly poor at 0.53fps, although dropping the quality setting increased this to 0.76fps.

Manual focus doesn't invoke an enlarged centre portion to help make accurate adjustments, so isn't much use. Manual exposure is better, with an exposure value (EV) display to help choose settings, although the histogram display merely reflects the brightness of the onscreen preview and not the exposure settings.

The f/3.5 to f/13.6 aperture range is more generous than on most compact cameras, though, and is available throughout the zoom range.

The S5700 and Kodak Z712 IS (below) are closely matched in features and price, so we put them head to head for image quality. They were hard to separate for detail, with the S5700 performing better in some tests and the Z712 IS in others. The Z712 IS gave



the best colour reproduction overall, with the S5700's vivid colours looking a touch oversaturated at times. However, it wasn't enough to cause any serious concerns and, in isolation, colours looked excellent.

Automatic settings had a tendency to jump to unnecessarily fast shutter speeds and ISO speeds when shooting in dimmer conditions, resulting in more image noise. However, noise levels were still significantly less than in the Z712 IS's images, and shots at ISO 800 and even 1600 were often excellent. This goes some way towards compensating for the lack of image stabilisation, as it allows faster shutter speeds to be used without spoiling photos.

The S5700's image quality is typical at this price, but the 10x zoom and manual exposure controls are unprecedented extras. The slow performance, lack of image stabilisation and awkward manual focus mean it's worth spending more on Panasonic's DMC-FZ50 (left) if you can afford it. However, for creative photographers on a tight budget, the S5700 is fantastic value.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Enthusiast-friendly features
- ✓ Amazingly low price
- ✗ No image stabilisation

DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 10x optical zoom (38-380mm, 35mm equivalent), SD and xD slots (27MB internal), 4x AA batteries
PART CODE N079390A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 62)



KODAK EasyShare Z712 IS

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT

Ultra-zoom cameras usually cost a lot more than Kodak's Z712 IS. Even more surprising is that its 12x zoom lens comes with optical image stabilisation to reduce blur from camera shake. This is a particularly useful feature in ultra-zoom cameras, as big zooms magnify shaky hand movements as well as the image.

Just as impressive are the Z712's controls. A command dial gives fast access to ISO, exposure compensation, shutter speed and aperture. An exposure value (EV) readout assists choosing settings and extends way beyond the usual +/-2 values. A 2x digital zoom helps with manual focus adjustments, but it could be even bigger to make precise manual focus easy.

It may not quite be pocket-sized, but the design is as small as we've seen for an SLR-styled camera. However, it's not as comfortable to use as Fujifilm's S5700 (above). Battery life is decent from a pair of high-capacity Ni-MH

batteries, but the icons to show which way round to insert them shows the ends you can't see rather than the ends you can. Even more annoying is that the date has to be reset every time the batteries are replaced.

If you tend to shoot a couple of photos at a time, you should have no problem with the two-second gap between shots. However, after seven shots the buffer becomes full and the gap extends to eight seconds. We also managed to corrupt photos by removing the batteries or SD card before the camera had finished saving them; this can take 40 seconds after a rapid burst of

shooting. Continuous shooting is at 2fps but is limited to six shots. There are options to save the first or last six in a burst of shots (the latter option discards earlier shots in the series), but the icons used to distinguish one mode from the other aren't clear.

The main advantage the Z712 IS has over the Fujifilm S5700 is its optical image stabilisation. Sadly, though, it isn't hugely effective; less



than half of our test shots were sharp when shooting with a 1/30s shutter speed and a 105mm focal length. Image stabilisation systems in other cameras manage to keep between 75 and 100 per cent of shots sharp. However, when shooting at the full 12x zoom setting, most shots were sharp at 1/60s, while most of the Fujifilm's shots were blurred using the same settings.

Our image tests revealed exceptional colour reproduction, with particularly good flesh tones. Focus was up to scratch, too, and automatic exposure settings coped well with tricky lighting. However, heavy noise reduction at ISO 400 gave photos a smeared appearance, and photos at ISO 800 were blotchy. Even so, images were as good as from many similarly priced cameras that don't match the Z712 IS's features.

Both this and the Fujifilm S5700 have their strengths and weaknesses, but the S5700's lower price gives it a slight edge.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent manual controls
- ✓ 12x zoom; stabilised lens
- ✗ Inconsistent performance

DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 12x optical zoom (36-432mm, 35mm equivalent), SD slot (32MB internal), 2x AA batteries
PART CODE 1318799
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.kodak.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 62)



SAMSUNG S85

★★★★★

£98 inc VAT

Few £100 cameras are as capable as Samsung's S85. Its headline specifications include an eight-megapixel sensor, 5x optical zoom, 2½in screen and face detection, making it hard to separate on paper from the premium cameras in this month's *Labs* test on page 106. The plastic case isn't the most stylish, though, and at 210g it's a little heavy for a compact camera, although not enough to make it feel cumbersome.

Performance is often the first thing to go when designing a budget camera, but the S85 is quick, taking a shot every 1.9 seconds. The fast auto-focus had a large part to play in this, although it couldn't focus on subjects less than 80cm away without activating the macro mode. A second, super-macro mode was required to focus from 1-5cm. This is a little convoluted for our liking, but if it contributes to the fast performance then it's a fair compromise, and the 1cm macro focus is a real treat.

Our image quality tests produced photos that we would be happy to get from a



camera costing twice as much. Colour accuracy was hard to fault, detail was crisp and noise levels were acceptable even at ISO 800. The camera proved capable of excellent indoor photos, but poorly judged automatic settings gave needlessly slow shutter speeds, resulting in blur. Setting the ISO speed manually quickly solved the problem, but casual users won't want to be grappling with these settings.

The inclusion of Ni-MH batteries and a charger in the box makes the S85 even better value than the very similar Samsung S850 (reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* August 2007), although the disappearance of priority modes and manual focus is regrettable. However, as with the S850, it's the misjudged automatic settings that take the shine off what would otherwise be an unbeatable camera.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Superb image quality
- ✓ Impressive features for the price
- ✗ Misjudged automatic exposure settings

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 5x optical zoom (38-190mm, 35mm equivalent), SDHC slot (20MB internal), 2x AA Ni-MH batteries **PART CODE** 8801089436528 **SUPPLIER** www.pcw.com **DETAILS** www.samsungcamera.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 62)



PENTAX Optio E40

★★★

£90 inc VAT

The Optio E40 is Pentax's most affordable camera, although you might not guess it from the 8-megapixel sensor and 2.4in screen. The plain design is more of a giveaway, though, and so too is the use of AA batteries. Disposable batteries are supplied in the box, but the camera managed 628 shots from a pair of 2,700mAh Ni-MH cells, which is a fantastic result.

This is the most affordable camera we've seen that includes face detection. It proved its worth by quickly finding faces and ignoring bright and dark backgrounds to achieve a balanced exposure on our subject's face. Other options are fairly typical of a point-and-shoot camera, but it's good to see manual focus and ISO speeds up to 1000. However, the 110,000-pixel resolution of the LCD screen makes it tricky to focus manually.

Performance is the E40's weakest area. It takes almost half a second from the time the shutter button is half-pressed before it even starts auto-focusing. This contributes to an overall focus time of between 1 and



2½ seconds and an average of 4 seconds between photos. This is worse than its predecessor, the Pentax E30 (*Labs, Shopper* September 2007). Continuous mode has disappeared altogether.

Image quality was never poor but failed to compete with the best cameras at this price. Flesh tones tended to be a little pasty, and pictures displayed less detail and more noise than from most 8-megapixel cameras. Indoor shots without

the flash were well exposed, but only sharp enough for viewing onscreen and not for printing out.

The E40 doesn't have any serious flaws, but its image quality and performance are below average, even at this price. It's disappointing that its higher resolution over the E30 seems to have damaged performance without providing any extra image detail.

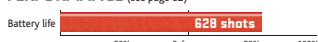
Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Long battery life
- ✗ Slow auto-focus
- ✗ Below-par detail

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 3x optical zoom (37.5-112.5mm), SDHC slot (10MB internal), 2x AA batteries **PART CODE** 19196 **SUPPLIER** www.purelygadgets.co.uk **DETAILS** www.pentax.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 62)



CHOOSING AN... Ultra-Zoom Camera

Follow the steps to your ideal specs

RESOLUTION: 6 megapixels
ZOOM: 6x optical (35-210mm), no stabilisation
MONITORING: 2in, 115,000-pixel LCD screen
EXPOSURE MODES: Auto
SUPPLIED MEMORY: 10MB internal
BATTERIES: 2x AA disposable

Recommended minimum in grey

1 An ultra-zoom camera gives you more freedom to frame your photos in interesting ways, allowing you to shoot faraway or small subjects or zoom in on a particular area of a scene. A camera with the specifications shown above in grey is essentially a standard compact camera with a larger zoom than normal, but ultra-zoom cameras often come with other advanced features for creative photography.

2 Now 6 megapixels is an entry-level specification, resolution is fairly irrelevant. We've seen 6-megapixel cameras that capture more detail than 10-megapixel cameras. If you want to print enlargements, read our reviews to find out how much detail a camera is capable of providing.

3 A 6x zoom isn't bad, but many cameras offer 10x or more. However, while higher zoom settings magnify the image, they also magnify blur caused by camera shake, so optical image stabilisation is particularly useful for steadying shots. Most zooms start at a 35mm focal length, but lower values allow for wide-angle photography.

4 LCD screens of 2½in and larger are a treat to use, but they don't always offer more detail. Only the best ones have resolutions of 200,000 or more pixels. Many ultra-zoom cameras also include an electronic viewfinder (EVF), which is an additional LCD screen in lieu of an optical viewfinder.

5 Creative photographers should try to look out for aperture priority, shutter priority and manual exposure modes, and manual focus. High ISO speeds can be useful for low-light handheld photography, but only if reasonable image quality is maintained.

6 Bundled memory is always inadequate, so budget £15 for a 1GB memory card, and another £15 if the camera doesn't include rechargeable batteries.